

IDEAS AT Work

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Ratings help PC users select best programs

One of the biggest problems facing users of personal computers is selecting software. Which programs, out of the thousands available, are the best for your particular business situation?

Happily, the days are past when you had to hire programmers or write your own programs from scratch in order to get one that's just right. In most cases today, off-the-shelf software is available that can be adapted with minimal effort for almost any situation.

Your first step is simply to narrow your choices from thousands to dozens. Typically, this isn't so hard. By talking with computer sales representatives and other people in your industry, you can usually build a list of reliable programs that are used by other businesses with similar needs.

The bigger problem is narrowing the choice to the top two or three. It's wise to hold off actual testing of programs until the top two or three are identified.

If your needs are in one of the few major applications areas, such as word processing, data-base management, spread sheets or accounting, there is plenty of competition and lots of choices. Here, especially, is where the use of software ratings comes in.

For personal computer software, there are three publications that regularly provide numeric ratings of popular products based upon actual testing. Here is a short description of each, along with my evaluation:

✓ **The Ratings Newsletter** is published 10 times a year by Software Digest Inc. of Philadelphia. Each issue focuses on another type of IBM PC-compatible software and provides in-depth evaluations of each product tested. A typical issue might cover 20 products and be 80 pages long. The 10 reports issued in 1985 were: word processing programs with spelling checkers,

scores. "Ease of use" is not given a high enough weighting. What good is superior performance if you can't figure out how to make it work?

✓ **Infoworld** calls itself "The newspaper for the microcomputing community." Every week it has gossipy stories about the latest goings-on in the personal computer industry — including descriptions of new products and feature stories. Its product reviews include hardware as well as software, and also include reviews of Apple Computer software as well as IBM PC-compatible software. All types of

diverse software are reviewed, not just the 10 types covered by the Ratings Newsletter. A subscription is \$39 a year.

Evaluation: Unlike the Ratings Newsletter, which uses a panel of reviewers and averages the scores given by each reviewer, just one author writes each review for Infoworld and rates each product. Each week you see different people reviewing different products. This provides no continuity from product to product. If reviewer "A" rates a certain word processing product a "5," it really can't be compared with a "7" given by another reviewer to another word processing product. Infoworld makes no attempt to compare products to others in the same category. Worse, I've seen good reviews given to products that work well but are a waste of time to use.

✓ **Micro Test Lab Software Ratings** is published by the Datapro Corp. as part of its three-volume "Datapro Reports On Microcomputers." This expensive set costs \$719 a year and is updated monthly. Much more than software ratings are provided, with sections on systems, monitors, printers and expansion cards. The ratings are similar to those in the Ratings Newsletter, but less detailed and covering fewer products.



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word processing programs without spelling checkers, file management programs, relational database management programs, spread-sheet programs, graphics programs, integrated accounting programs, project management programs, communications, and integrated productivity programs. Cost for the newsletter is \$295 a year.

Evaluation: Of the three rating sources, The Ratings Newsletter is, by far, the best and most thorough. The reports are easy to read and understand, with a format that quickly identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each product. In most instances, I've agreed with ratings of the top three or four in each category — although not always with the order in which they appeared. My only gripe is that some products that are difficult to use somehow still score high in the Ratings Newsletter's overall

Covering fewer products.

Evaluation: Datapro has long been a leader in providing reference materials for data processing managers and professionals, and this set provides the same type of information for small computers as its other volumes provide for minicomputers and mainframes. Surprisingly, I found the quality of the reviews to be inferior to the lower-priced Ratings Newsletter.

There are many other publications, including my own monthly newsletter, **Executive Computing**, that provide reviews. But too often these are written by inexperienced journalists rather than business people or consultants.

Here's a tip: Always look for a description of problems encountered when the program was run. If the article doesn't discuss any, chances are that it was written entirely from handouts provided by the publisher, and the program wasn't really tested at all.

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant who specializes in helping businesses select and use personal computer hardware and software. He can be reached at the Personal Computers Managers Association, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.